

Chapter Eleven: Archives

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11: 1 Mission and Purpose

The mission of the Alcoholics Anonymous Archives is to document permanently the work of Alcoholics Anonymous Great Britain to make the history of the organization accessible to AA members and other researchers, and to provide a context for understanding AA's progression, principles and traditions.

There are several AA archives. The largest is the General Service Office Archive which is now located at the Borthwick Institute for Archives at the University of York and managed by archivists there. But there is also a large collection of Scottish archives in the Northern Service Office in Glasgow, and there are many regional and intergroup archives, including those in the Continental European Region (CER), which have been collected and looked after by AA archivists. Most of the guidance in this chapter is directed at these archivists who together constitute the AAGB Archivists' Network. This guidance is compiled from the shared experience of AA members in various service areas. It also reflects guidance given through the Twelve Traditions and the General Service Conference. In keeping with our Tradition of autonomy, except in matters affecting other groups or AA as a whole, most decisions are made by the group conscience of the members involved.

In 1995 the General Service Board adopted a policy statement, subsequently ratified by Conference, which reads: *"Where any civilisation, or society perishes, one condition is present, they forgot where they came from"* – Carl Sandburg. These words represent a good reason why the General Service Board (and Conference) re-affirm its commitment and support for archival activity as a vital and integral part of the healthy life and growth of the Fellowship in this country. Just as each of us feels that it is essential to recall and appreciate where we came from, and how we got here, so it is with the Fellowship as a whole. The General Service Board recognises the need for accurate records to be rescued, retained, catalogued and used in a manner which will serve to dispel some myths which swirl distortingly around our past, thus allowing us to obtain a truer perspective and reveal to us our real heritage, so that our future may be ensured.

11:2 Keeping an Archive as a part of our primary purpose

Like any other AA service, the aim of those involved in archival work is to carry the message of Alcoholics Anonymous. Looking after an archive is not just a custodial task; it is the means by which we collect, preserve and share the rich and meaningful heritage of our Fellowship. The creation of

stories and presentations from our archives give us valuable insight into how our Fellowship came to mature. It is by the collection and sharing of these important historical elements that our collective gratitude for Alcoholics Anonymous is deepened.

Thus archive activity may be regarded in the same light as other services that members of the Fellowship provide in order to fulfil our primary purpose to the best of our ability. This is a responsibility and a debt, no less, which we owe to ourselves and others; it is as richly endowed with simple spiritual principles of humility, sacrifice and prudence as the rest of our work. It is also an act of practical simplicity and efficient practice. Planned and co-ordinated records are an essential tool to efficient administration and the basis of any history to come. This combination of practical and spiritual simplicity is maintained by the commitment of AA archivists with the support of the General Service Board.

11:3 AA Archives

The archives of Alcoholics Anonymous GB, be they the GSO archive now located in the Borthwick Institute, or regional and intergroup archives held locally, are collections of administrative files, correspondence, manuscripts, publications, photographs, audio-visual material, artefacts, and memorabilia related to the origin and the development of AAGB.

Consistent with AA's primary purpose of maintaining our sobriety and helping other alcoholics achieve recovery, these archives should:

- Hold, catalogue, and conserve such material
- Provide access to these materials for members of Alcoholics Anonymous and to others who may have a valid need to review such material, contingent upon a commitment to preserve the anonymity of our members
- Promote knowledge and understanding of the origins, goals and programme of Alcoholics Anonymous

Even though the GSO Archives are located at the Borthwick Institute, they remain the property of AA Great Britain, Ltd., which is the charity established by the Fellowship as a whole. Regional and intergroup archives are the property of the relevant group – i.e., region or intergroup. Thus archivists are custodians of group archives, not owners of them. So it is important that archivists guard against disputes about ownership of any archive they have been looking after which might arise after their death by:

- i. Clearly distinguishing papers and other materials which constitute an AA archive which they have been looking after and which may well be housed in their home from similar items which belong to their own personal collection of papers and other things;
- ii. Including in their will a codicil to the effect that the papers and other materials in the AA archive are the property of their region or intergroup, to which they should be returned after their death

11:4 The Role of the Archivist

Archivists share the aim of preserving the Fellowship's past and ensuring that fact prevails over fiction or myth. They are responsible for collecting, arranging, preserving and providing access to permanent historical records of enduring value. The nature of the archival materials they deal with is

usually unpublished and unique. They employ professional standards and practices unique to archiving to ensure the safety, security, integrity and authenticity of the materials under their care. They are also responsible for ensuring the protection of the anonymity of members of AA, past and present, and the confidentiality of records concerning them.

The role of the Archivist can be considered therefore to be twofold:

- i. There is a custodial responsibility for maintaining the physical integrity of the collection;
- ii. There is an interpretative responsibility for creating an inventory of the collection in such a way that it is a source of knowledge and understanding.

In these ways archivists seek to fulfil Bill W's urging that archives are needed "so that myth doesn't prevail over fact". AA Archivists are "keepers of the past", and many archivists conduct historical research for the groups they serve. But in all cases the archives they look after carry the message from yesterday into today so that those who want help can hear the message tomorrow.

Unlike those who hold other service positions with the Fellowship, archivists are not subject to the normal principle of rotation after three years, since continuity at all levels has been shown, through experience, to be a vital aspect of archival work. But when they do resign their position as archivist, they should try to find, with the help of their region or intergroup, a successor who is prepared to act as a custodian of the archive they have been caring for.

11:5 The Role of the Fellowship Archivist

The Fellowship Archivist is an archivist appointed by the General Service Board to oversee the care of all of AA's Archives and in this role to seek to achieve an effective liaison between the AA Archivist at the Borthwick Institute, the General Service Office, the Archives Sub Committee, and the members of the Archives Network. Thus the Fellowship Archivist:

- Takes responsibility for maintaining the Archives Network (see 11:7 below)
- Advises the Archives Sub Committee on matters within its responsibility (see 11:8 below)
- Advises the General Secretary in his role as Data Protection Office for the AA Archive at the Borthwick Institute (see 11:10 below)
- Advises AA Archivists on the creation, development, and management of their archive
- Works with the AA Web manager on developing the archives section of the AA website

11:6 Developing and using an Archive

Archivists will typically take over and then develop collections of region and intergroup minutes, administrative paperwork, correspondence, conference reports, newsletters, literature, books, and photographs. Audio-visual items can be a valuable addition to an archive collection, and an archivist might also arrange to audio record old timers, in order to create oral histories. Local AA historical material such as letters, bulletins and photographs should be collected regularly from old timers, past delegates and various committee members etc. Do not forget non-alcoholics who were instrumental in helping AA in the early years of the fellowship.

It is very important for an archivist to keep an updated box list or inventory of the material in their care. If the collection they have taken over does not come with an inventory, they should try to

make one. This may be a large and difficult task, and they should not be afraid to ask for help from the Fellowship Archivist and through the Archives Network (see 11:7). Further information about the process of creating box lists can be found in the Guide for AA Regional and Intergroup Archivists and the Policy and Procedures Manual for Archivists which are available from GSO.

While this will require careful, and perhaps tedious, cataloguing and conservation work, it is worth returning to the point emphasised earlier, that the role of the archivist is not just custodial. The aim of preserving these records of past discussions, debates and decisions is to make this past available to present members of the Fellowship so that they can create a better future, and archivists have a central role in fulfilling this goal. So in addition to the procedures listed above archivists are encouraged to take a lead in organising more enjoyable activities, such as:

- Publicising and participating in local history gathering efforts
- Providing displays at AA events and gatherings
- Encouraging, facilitating, and undertaking historical research

11:7 The Archives Network

For many years archivists have connected with each other in an informal network which enables them to share advice and experience. The role of this informal network is to further or facilitate the identification, recording and securing of archival material, as well as stimulating interest in archival activity by carrying the message of “Don’t throw me away, I belong to AA”. Experience shows that this can be furthered by promoting regional workshops based on such archival topics as:

- Classification and Cataloguing
- Conservation, Storage and Accessibility
- Confidentiality and Anonymity
- Questions to ask Old Timers
- Archives and local histories
- Organising exhibitions

In recent years the practice has developed of an annual meeting of the whole network at the General Service Office in York, as occasions at which experienced archivists can pass on their expertise to those who have only recently become an archivist, and for the purpose of consulting the network concerning the further development of AA’s archives.

11:8 The Archives Sub Committee

The Archives Sub Committee recommends policy, projects, budgets and procedures to the General Service Board. It advises the Fellowship on the storage, conservation and preservation of archival material deposited in trust. Members of the sub committee are appointed by the General Service Board as required. The Fellowship Archivist and the Board Trustee are integral members of this committee.

The Archives Sub Committee is responsible for establishing policies and procedures for archivists within the Fellowship. This includes suggestions concerning the types of material of historical significance which will enhance an archive and the ways in which archives can be put to use within

the Fellowship. An important further function of the Archives Sub Committee is to develop and maintain the Archives Network within the Fellowship at all levels as recommended by Conference.

11:9 Preserving AA's archives

Now that the GSO archive has been moved to the Borthwick Institute, its long-term future is assured, at least while the current relationship between AA and the Borthwick Institute is in place.

But what about local regional and intergroup archives?

Regions and intergroups cannot be expected to find the money to hire convenient storage facilities. So the default solution is that local archivists make their own arrangements to store their collections – either at home or in some other location where conditions are suitable for the storage of archive materials. But an Intergroup or Regional Archivist cannot be expected to store vast amounts of archival material, nor should this factor be a barrier to taking up the post. So if storage is a problem, other arrangements will need to be considered and talks should take place with the Fellowship Archivist as to the best arrangements in the circumstances.

In 2021 Conference recommended that, subject to the autonomy of groups assured under Tradition 4, materials that are 10 years old or older should be transferred from local archives to the GSO Archive at the Borthwick Institute. The Archives Sub Committee is currently deliberating as to the best way of implementing this recommendation. Central considerations are:

- i. The importance of preserving unique materials that are of importance to the development of the Fellowship;
- ii. The importance of maintaining and supporting a vibrant network of local archives which sustain local AA traditions and identity.

The Sub Committee is likely to recommend that, as a first step, local archivists should send an inventory of their archive (see 11:6) to the AA Archivist at Borthwick Institute, in order to initiate a dialogue concerning the possible transfer of important materials, or copies of them, which are not currently contained in the AA Archive at the Borthwick Institute. More detailed guidance will be provided, but any archivist, region, or intergroup facing immediate problems should contact GSO for advice.

11:10 Anonymity and GDPR

As emphasized above, one of the main purposes of AA's archives is to facilitate historical and social research concerning AAGB and the Fellowship. So this use of AA's archives is to be welcomed. But for two reasons access to the archives has to be carefully managed. One will be familiar to the Fellowship: the protection of anonymity, which implies that access to papers which reveal the identity of AA members needs to be strictly controlled. The second reason is new legislation concerning 'General Data Protection Regulation' (GDPR), as laid down by the Data Protection Act (2018) which specifies how GDPR rules apply to archives such as AA's archives which are 'Archives in the Public Interest' because of their importance for historical and social research.

Under this legislation archivists are exempted from the GDPR rules which apply to medical databases and similar collections of data which require individual consent for the preservation of personal data, allow individuals to remove their personal data ('the right to be forgotten'), and require

archivists to correct mistakes in the personal data they hold. Instead 'archives in the public interest' are subject to the following rules:

- i. The archives themselves must allow public access if they are to be classified as 'archives in the public interest'. In the case of AA GB's archives, this is obviously facilitated by the fact that the GSO Archive is located at the Borthwick Institute whose catalogue is publicly accessible (see borthcat.york.ac.uk/aa); but in principle the same point applies to regional and intergroup archives.
- ii. Access to archives is subject to GDPR rules concerning the protection of the identity of individuals referred to in archive materials, though the AA rule that anonymity is to be preserved for ever is stricter than the GDPR rule which holds that this requirement lapses after death.
- iii. Archives should have a specified Data Protection Officer (DPO) who will control access to the archive. In the case of the GSO AA Archive in the Borthwick Institute, the DPO will be the General Secretary, who will work closely with the Fellowship Archivist and the Archives Sub Committee in fulfilling this role. In the case of local archives it is probably best for the DPO to be the local archivist, acting on the advice of the Fellowship Archivist and GSO.

11: 11 Research and Access

Researchers wanting to access material in the AA GB Archive, should in the first instance check the online catalogue at borthcat.york.ac.uk/aa to ensure the archive holds material relevant to their research. If a researcher wants to view material, they should contact the Borthwick Institute for Archives who will provide further information about visiting the Borthwick's search room, or providing digital copies of the archive material if required.

Three levels of access are applied to material in the AAGB Archive at the Borthwick Institute, which are based on the type of record and the sensitivity of information they contain. In the online catalogue, the heading 'Conditions Governing Access' states which level of access the archive file or item falls under.

The three levels of access are:

a) General access:

Material is available for research purposes without special conditions, though researchers still need permission from the General Service Office, acting on the authority of the General Secretary as DPO, and access is subject to relevant data protection legislation.

Examples of General access material: Reports of the General Service Board and General Service Conference, literature, newsletters, and magazines.

b) Restricted access:

Access to material is restricted by the General Service Board of AAGB, and is normally permitted only for relevant research purposes. Enquiries regarding access will be handled in the first instance by the Borthwick Institute, who will forward requests for access to the General Secretary as DPO, or staff at GSO acting on their behalf.

Examples of Restricted material: Region and Intergroup minutes, sub committee minutes, directories, material related to service disciplines, audio/visual recordings

c) Confidential access:

This material has been classified as confidential by the General Service Board of AA GB, and access will only be permitted in exceptional circumstances. Enquiries regarding access will be handled in the first instance by the Borthwick Institute, who will forward requests for access to the General Secretary as DPO, who will normally consult Trustee members of the Archives Sub Committee.

Examples of Confidential material: General Service Board minutes, telephone logs.

Access permissions forms:

- i. Before accessing material in the AA GB Archives, researchers will be asked to complete an access permissions form. A copy of the form can be obtained by contacting GSO or from the Borthwick Institute. The purpose of an access permissions form is to ensure that the AAGB Archive is being used for appropriate research purposes, and for the protection of member anonymity. Once the access permission form has been submitted it will be reviewed by the Fellowship Archivist or staff at GSO acting on their behalf; they will endeavour to respond within 48 hours.
- ii. In addition, because archive material which contains sensitive information about living individuals falls under the Data Protection Act of 2018 (see above), researchers wishing to access records containing such information will be asked by the Borthwick Institute to complete a data protection statement once they have submitted their request to access material.

Researchers working in the archives should understand that they will be expected to adhere strictly to AA anonymity Traditions – only first names and last initials of AA members may be used by them. It is recommended that there be no photocopying of private correspondence. This recommendation, whilst designed to assure anonymity protection, also helps maintain the physical integrity of archival documents. In addition to the preservation of the anonymity of the author of the correspondence, the writer's private opinions and observations, some of which might be highly controversial, must be treated with extreme delicacy. It should be remembered that members share these documents with a trust and expectation that their remarks will be held in confidence. No one has an intrinsic right to view another's private correspondence; it is essential that the archivist's chief concern of assuring the spiritual wholeness of the collection be understood and supported.

11:12 References

For more detailed discussion of archival matters please read the Archives Service literature available from GSO and liaise with the Fellowship Archivist and members of the Archive Network.

The Alcoholics Anonymous Great Britain Archive online catalogue can be accessed at <https://borthcat.york.ac.uk/aa>

For more detailed information about managing and protecting archives please refer to the Guide for Intergroup and Region Archivists.

Information about the Data Protection Act (2018) can be found in the guide produced by The National Archives - <https://cdn.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/information-management/guide-to-archiving-personal-data.pdf>

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